THE FURY OF THE PHILIPPINES

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WORLD/COVER

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The procession stretched for four kilometres along Quezon Boulevard in Manila

last week. Mourners, 15 to 20 abreast, wearing yellow headscarves and black armbands, marched and shouted, “Free our country” behind the flag-draped coffin of Benigno (Ninoy)

Aquino Jr., as it wound its way to the Santo Domingo Roman Catholic Church where his body, its face still showing a gaping bullet wound, was taken for what amounted to a state funeral.

Secretaries and workers looked on from the office buildings lining the boulevard. Along the route, mourners waved placards and signs with the question,

“Who killed our hero?” By the hundreds of thousands they cried, “Ninoy, Ninoy” and “Fight, fight, fight,” reminding Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos—and the world—of the potency of political martyrdom.

The assassination of Aquino as he stepped off a plane at Manila International Airport on Sun., Aug. 21, shattered the hopes of millions of his followers for a renewal of democracy in the Philippines. The single shot from a .357 magnum that felled the charismatic 50-year-old politician raised serious allegations about the potential involvement of authoritarian president Marcos and his base of power, the military. It also gravely affected the chance of moderates wresting power from Marcos in elections next year and indeed the very future of the archipelago which is so vital to U.S. military interests in the Pacific. Even as Aquino lay in state last week—encased in glass, his chin showing the dark blotch where the bullet exited, his once-white tunic darkened by blood stains—fears of “another Iran” were nervously voiced in Washington. Then, late last week, 3,000 rockand bomb-throwing students clashed with security men at Far Eastern University in

Manila in the first outbreak of violence since Aquino's murder. It took club-wielding police six hours to subdue the crowd.

Aquino was sometimes called the "John F. Kennedy" of the Philippines, and the controversy over his assassination will linger as long—if not longer— than that over the U.S. president's. He was born in 1932 in Concepcion, north of Manila, to a prominent political family of sugar plantation owners. Aquino was

elected mayor of his home town at age 22, governor of Tarlac province at 29, and to the Senate at 34. Emerging as a serious threat to Marcos, who was elected president in 1965, Aquino's Liberal Party finished strongly in the Senate elections of 1971 and was favored heavily again in 1973. When opinion polls showed that he would defeat Imelda Marcos (standing for her husband, who was prevented by the constitution of the day from running for a third term) in a presidential election, Aquino was jailed in 1972 after Marcos declared martial law. Accused of murder, subversion and illegal possession of firearms, Aquino was finally convicted in 1977 and sentenced to death. He was given a conditional release and was allowed to go to the United States in 1980 to have heart surgery. Aquino's eventual return to Manila was fatalistic. On May 21, at the Philippines consulate in New York, Aquino met for 3V2 hours with Imelda Marcos (page 19). Marcos' message to her husband's most threatening political foe was clear: Aquino was marked for death. Marcos warned Aquino that if he returned from

exile there were radicals and even factions within the Philippine government that wanted him dead—and they were beyond the government's control. "Think of your family for a change," Marcos told Aquino. "You can all remain in the United States and enjoy life." Aquino said after the meeting that Marcos had offered him any amount of money he wanted to support himself, his wife and his five children.

After Aquino indicated that he still wanted to return, the Manila government tried to block him by first refusing to grant travel documents, then threatening to fine any airline that would bring an "undocumented passenger " to the Philippines, and finally warning him to delay his trip by 30 days. Aquino delayed it for two weeks.

En route to Manila, Aquino told supporters in San Francisco that he expected to be placed under house arrest in Manila, at least until after President Ronald Reagan's scheduled visit in November. Failing that, he said, he might be portrayed by Marcos as a new ally in order to discredit him. Or he would be killed. Then, referring to Philippine martyr José Rizal, who returned from exile in 1896 only to be executed by the Spanish, he declared, "If I should die at the hand of the oppressors, let it be."

On the weekend, the alleged assassin was identified as Rolando Vizcarra, a former member of the presidential guard. But who choreographed the assassination remains a mystery. It led to a chorus of demands from abroad for a full and impartial investigation. Most passengers on China Airlines Flight 811 said that on arrival three soldiers (including one who smiled and shook Aquino's hand) escorted him from the plane via a service ladder. As news cameramen tried futilely to follow, a shot was heard,

accompanied by three more. Freelance Japanese journalist Kiyoshi Wakamiya retracted his original claim that he had seen the shooting, but he still

maintained that Aquino was shot by soldiers and not by a lone gunman as Philippine authorities claim. Said the 37-year-old journalist: “When Aquino touched the ground and walked two or three steps, the officers accompanying him on either side all of a sudden pulled their guns from their waists. Right at that moment, there was the dry sound of gunshots, bang, bang. Aquino fell forward. There was a pool of blood.” Then Wakamiya, admitting that “my eye is not a camera,” added, “a man, as if being pushed out, suddenly emerged from the military van that was parked near the aircraft. It appeared that the officers who shot Aquino fired two or three shots into the man’s stomach.”

The official Philippine version is that the assassin, dressed as an airline maintenance worker, jumped from the AVSECOM (airport security

service) van, shot Aquino and was, in turn, shot by the soldiers. Before Vizcarra was named, the Marcos regime had posted a $45,000 reward. Spokesmen said that the name “Roily” was stitched on his underwear and that the letter “R” was engraved on a ring.

An autopsy report released late last week appeared to support Wakamiya’s version. The report confirmed that Aquino was shot from above and behind. The bullet entered his head behind his left ear and exited through his jaw. If Aquino was indeed standing when the shot was fired, the bullet passed through his head at an angle of 30 degrees. The government claims that the opposition leader was shot from about 18 inches. But because Aquino was five feet, six inches tall, the .357-magnum gun that killed him would have to have been fired from a height of just more than five feet, nine inches. The alleged assassin (whose body was left on the tarmac for five hours and who was shot in the face) was only five feet, seven inches tall. He would have to have fired the shot from the steps of the service exit of the plane or from inside the van to match the 30-degree trajectory. Or he would have to have been well over six feet, six inches to fire the fatal bullet while standing on the ground.

Marcos now faces growing pressure to solve the mystery from his own people, the opposition parties, his comembers in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and particularly the United States. Senator Edward Kennedy, for one, wrote to Reagan late last week urging him to cancel his trip to Manila in November. Said Kennedy: “It is unthinkable for an American president to visit the Philippines until the perpetrators of this crime against humanity are brought to justice.” The senator, brother of the assassinated U.S. president, also recommended that Congress delay all action on aid to the Philippines “until the Marcos government has conducted a full, satisfactory and impartial investigation of the Aquino assassination.” The issues that Marcos must resolve include:

•How did an assassin gain access to the tarmac carrying a .357 magnum;

•How, in full sight of perimeter guards, was the assassin able to approach his target and fire from within 18 inches before being gunned down himself; •Why, when only a handful of journalists and the military knew Aquino's flight number, did the assassin seek out gate number eight, Aquino's disembarkation point;

•How did he alone know that Aquino would deplane by the service stairs; •Why did an air force commando empty his Armalite into the prone body of the alleged assassin;

•Why were two sergeants and a constable, not top ranking officers, sent to detain the nation's most prominent dissident;

•Why are those three soldiers' identities being withheld;

•Why do those soldiers not appear in photographs taken immediately after the shooting;

•And who was the man seen running under the nose of the China Airlines 767 with a large bag in his hand.

For hours after the killing, the government refused to disclose Aquino's death to his family, friends, journalists or about 4,000 demonstrators who had gathered outside the airport. Ashenfaced passengers ran through the terminal corridors. Newsmen and film crews, whom soldiers had carefully shepherded to the wrong areas of the airport, raced through customs and immigration queues, and passengers from other flights stared at the clutches of weeping men and women. When Aquino's mother, Aurora, finally learned of his whereabouts, she drove, with her

daughters and a few friends, to the Philippine Army Hospital. There, she was blocked by troops of the elite Scout Rangers who were dressed in full combat kit, their Armalites at the ready. They told her that she was too late. Her son had been dead for hours. So too, apparently, were the hopes of the mod-

erates to unite and defeat Marcos in the National Assembly elections promised for next year. The Philippines have been under Marcos' autocratic rule since he declared martial law in 1972, in order to circumvent the U.S.-style constitution, which prevents a president serving more than two four-year terms under normal circumstances. Marcos was elected in 1965, but many Filipinos suspected that he fixed his re-election in 1969. Aquino posed a threat to Marcos because he was considered the only national figure capable of uniting the fractured opposition. He was widely believed to be the only man capable of rebuilding a Liberal Party with a broad enough appeal to attract all the various factions opposed to Marcos. Even the Communist Party expressed the belief that Aquino had a unique populist appeal. After his death, the party praised him for his "immense contributions" to attempts to bring down the Marcos regime. It also accused the president, his powerful wife and Gen. Fabian Ver, the Philippine army chief of staff and the nation's top intelligence officer, of being the "masterminds" behind the killing. Communist leaders declared that Aquino was slain as soon as he arrived in Manila

because it would have proved even more difficult later—despite the international embarrassment the killing has caused. “If he [Aquino] were allowed to regroup his forces,” a party statement read, a confrontation with the Marcos government “on more or less equal terms would have been inevitable.”

Still, Marcos was not without his defenders. “It’s not his [Marcos’] style,” said former senator Salvador Laurel— usually an opponent—who is president of the 12-member United Nationalist Democratic Organization (UNIDO). “Imelda’s no killer,” added one Western diplomat. But the composition of the five-member commission established to investigate the assassination satisfied few Filipinos. Members of Aquino’s family complained that they had not been consulted, and Aquino’s allies denounced it as “loaded” and “an insult to the people.” The commission, headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Enrique Fernandez, is made up of a former chief justice and three former supreme court judges. “The majority are all Marcos’ boys,” said Laurel.

The controversy over who will eventually succeed Marcos sharpened last week when he appeared on national television to ask for calm, after Manila suffered electrical failures, minor bank runs and rushes to food stores. The president declared that no one was “more sorrowful and regretful for what has happened.” However, it was not what the 65-year-old autocrat said but how he said it and how he looked that tional $150 million flows to the Philippine economy from employment of Filipinos at the bases and from spending by U.S. servicemen. Indeed, even the behavior of the sailors and airmen was addressed in the new agreement. Part of the $475 million in economic aid is compensation for the “social costs” of the military installations. Among the costs cited by the Marcos government during the negotiations in May were widespread prostitution, drug abuse, unwanted American children.

Marcos has been able to exact such a heavy toll (including territorial sovereignty over the bases, which now fly Philippine flags and are under the supervision of Philippine commanders) because they are so vital to the United States. Pentagon analysts consider Clark to be an essential bridge between the Pacific and the Indian oceans and a gateway to the Middle East.

If the United States were denied access to Mediterranean ports,

Clark is the designated base in Pentagon plans for supplying Israel, defending the new U.S. naval facility on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and as a staging point for reaching war zones in Africa. In the case of a Soviet invasion of Iran and a move on the Saudi oilfields, the first major counterattack would be launched from Clark—10 hours away by bomber, 10 days by ship.

In any future Korean conflict, contingency plans call for 9,000 cargo flights from Clark in the first 90 days. And without Subic the 7th Fleet would be scattered across ports in the Western Pacific.

As a result, when the United States protests against the rent increases, or condemns human rights abuses, Marcos inevitably reminds Washington that the base agreements can be cancelled, at a year's notice, by either side and that the Soviets are always ready to do business. It is a threat underlined by the Marcos' trip to Moscow in 1976 but tempered by economic realities. The United States is the Philippines' largest trading partner with two-way commerce exceeding $3.5 billion annually. (Japan and the Netherlands are second and third respectively.) The United States also provides roughly half of the foreign investment in the archipelago, valued at more than $1.3 billion. Still, although the Philippines' foreign debt is close to $15.3 billion and its payments deficit reached $1.14 billion last year, because of Clark and Subic bases the puppet has the United States on a string. The string runs out in 1991.

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